Role Of Dalit Women In The First War Of Independence

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Abstract: The Indian freedom struggle, spanning from the mid-19th century to 1947, was a multifaceted movement against British colonial rule that involved diverse sections of society. While often dominated by narratives of upper-caste male leaders, the contributions of lower caste women (including Dalits and other marginalized groups) were pivotal, though frequently under recognized. These groups not only participated in anti-colonial activities but also intertwined their fight for independence with demands for social equality, challenging caste hierarchies and gender norms. Their involvement helped shape a more inclusive vision for post-independence India, influencing constitutional safeguards and social reforms. The study of Dalit women in the 1857 Indian Uprising, featuring figures like Uda Devi Pasi and Jhalkari Bai, highlights their pivotal role in anti-colonial resistance and the fight against caste oppression. Utilizing oral traditions, it reclaims these Dalit heroic women as essential agents of popular, anti-imperialist, and anti-caste struggle, challenging traditional nationalist narratives.

Keywords: Dalit, Pasi, 1857, First War of Independence.

Introduction

The Revolt of 1857 or First War of Independence is the most written event in the Indian history due to its pluralistic nature and multi-racial participants of this revolt. Besides different theories of the nature of this revolt, most of the Indian historians are unanimous in asserting that the 1857 revolt was a popular uprising against the British. The role of different communities in the revolt is a matter of debate by historians and intellectuals. While few literatures, intellectuals and historians claim that it was confined to the local kings and feudal landlords scattered across various parts of northern India like Rani of Jhansi, Nana Sahib Peshwa, Tatya Tope, Kunwar Singh and so on, and the lower castes only functioned as their soldiers, guards, watchmen etc., another section of intellectuals feels that a revolt on such a large scale could not have been planned and carried out with the help of only few groups of people. It needed the active participation of all the common people to make it a success.

Since the Indian society comprises a large number of lower and backward classes and Dalits were one of them who might have played very decisive role in this popular revolt. A historical fact to support this claim is that the import of Europeans clothes and objects to India rendered traditional artisan communities like weavers, carpenters, ironsmiths, shoe smiths and so on, all of whom were lower castes, jobless and without any alternative sources of income except begging.Thus, most of them actively joined in the revolt against the British as a protest against this social and economic injustice.

The outbreak of 1857 has been regarded as a memorable episode in Indian history. It was in a sense one of the first formidable revolt that had broken out against foreign domination. It is generally believed that the elite class and sepoys took part actively in the revolt of 1857. But how could it be possible such a large and long-lasting upsurge without the common people. Although Marxist school advocates the participation of the general masses but it doesn't mention the Dalit class and their women. Rudrangshu

Mukherjee emphasizes the mutual dependence between peasantry and talukdars, which provided the basis for common and united action at this tumultuous juncture. He thus links the seemingly disjointed and contradictory realms of the elite and the common masses. Gautam Bhadra also highlights the common leaders of the revolt. However, even these scholars, in spite of their best intentions, also do not explicitly focus on Dalits and even less so on women.

Some of the historical text such as "Khandge Ghadar" of Muinuddin Hasan, the Kotwal of Pahargunj under Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, proves the contribution of Dalits in the 1857 revolt. Although the author has used a number of derogatory adjectives for them but it is clear that they played an active role in the revolt. In many places he has also used the word '*Chamar*' for the revolutionaries as a form of abuse. At one place he writes that when Nawab Mirza Sahib was being pressurized by the revolutionaries to contribute funds for the revolt he retorted,' Now you chamars have come to a stage when you are asserting yourself over us' (*Ab Tum Chamaron Ka Yah Star Ki Hum Par Dhauns Jamaate Ho*).[1]

However, while describing the revolt in Allahabad or Prayag Muinuddin Hasan says, A person named Maulvi Liaqat Ali lived in a mosque in the cantonment. He had many followers; many people were his devotees. He stitched a green flag and gave it the name *Muhammadi* flag. He claimed it to be his kingdom and inspired all his followers for *Jehad* (holy crusade). He himself became a self-proclaimed *Khalifa* (emperor). At his call, a large number of *Julahas, Bhatiyaras, Kunjras, Teli, Nai, Kasambhi Muftkhor* and *Looters* gathered together. All the British and Sikh soldiers were imprisoned in the fort. Allahabad and its adjoining regions came under the rule of the Maulvi.[2]

Hasan further mentions that the Dalits had a very active presence in the 1857 revolt and made a significant contribution to it. He says that Banda Nawab Ali Bahadur went to Kalpi to meet Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. Tatya Tope and Rao Bandarang had already reached there. All headed towards Gwalior and after an arduous battle the revolutionary leaders gained controlled over Gwalior. After gaining control Rao Sahib started recruiting men for their army. People from all castes like *Dhuniya, Julaha, Teli, Tamoli, Chamar* and so on unhesitantly joined as servants and soon the army was ready.[3] This narrative too shows how the dalits were present in large numbers in the revolutionary army.

The rise of the Dalit historiography and literature in north India, the history of 1857 was rewritten, particularly since the 1960s. Dalit perceptions constructed "popular" perceptions, and depicted the Dalit versions of the revolt. Dalit writers are attempting here to look upon the mutiny as part of their struggle for freedom. The rebel Dalit heroes- some constructed, some exaggerated, some "discovered"- have become heroes fighting for a free India. In these accounts, the armies of soldiers against British consist largely of Dalits. New Dalit histories argue that the Dalits had nothing much to lose in pre-British times, as their condition had been miserable even then. As the famous Dalit poet Bihari Lal Harit says regarding 1857:[4]

"Nai, Dhobi, Kurmi, Kachchi, Bharbhuje, Bhaat, Kumhaar Lare,
Lare Khak Rub Mochi, Dhanak, Sab Daliton Ke Parivar Lare"
(Barbers, washermen, kurmis, gardeners, grain-parchers, bards and potters fought. Cobblers rolling in dust and cotton-carders fought. All Dalit families fought.)

Following the above stanza, it is clear that the Dalit narratives of 1857 deploy an impassioned language, and are written usually by Dalit men who are not trained historians. They are writing history with a mission by claiming a past and using it for the furtherance of their future. They are rewriting history to provide dignity to the Dalits. It entailed united Dalit activism and sacrifice of enormous numbers. 1857 has also become a marker for the Dalits to prove their nationalist credentials, and claim their own space

in the freedom struggle and the history of a nation in the making. These histories are not just reinventions of the past or inspirational histories but they also reveal a deep impassioned plea to recognize the unsung heroes of the revolt, who were often illiterate and left no written records. Folksongs, oral narratives and myths also thus become the basis of these accounts. As says one:[5]

"Yatra-Tatra Sarvatra Milegi, Unki Gaatha Ki Charcha,
Kintu Upekshit Veervaron Ka Kabhi Nahin Chapta Parcha"
(Here, there and everywhere, you will find discussions on their deeds, but the scorned (Dalit) heroes are never written about in papers.)

The language and vocabulary deployed in Dalit literature on 1857 stresses the need for digitization of history and to examine the Dalit leaders of the revolt. Dalits claim that reinventing 1857 from a Dalit perspective is imperative in order to represent reality. While appropriating the past, Dalit writers are simultaneously questioning the blurred presentations and prejudiced histories of historians, arguing that Dalit heroes of the revolt have been completely erased by them.

From all the above narrative it is clear that a sizeable number of Dalit castes joined forces with the revolutionary leaders to fight against the British. More interestingly, we find that even the Dalit women not only encouraged their men to fight against the British but many of them actively leaded the revolt and fought against the British until their last breath.

Dalit Women and the First War of Independence

Lower castes women, particularly Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables"), contributed to the freedom struggle while simultaneously fighting caste-based oppression, often viewing independence as incomplete without social justice. Their involvement challenged the caste hierarchy, intersecting with anti-colonial efforts. Lower-caste women along with their men actively participated in early resistance against British rule, often in roles overlooked in mainstream narratives focused on upper-caste figures. The Dalit narrative of the first freedom struggle is filled with stories about brave women martyrs belonging to suppressed communities like Jhalkari Bai, Avanti Bai, Pannadhai, Uda Devi Pasi and Mahaviri Devi, etc. A renowned Dalit Matadin Bhangi[6] is considered the main instigator of the First War of Independence. According to subaltern historians and Dalit activists, he should be recognized as the instigator of the revolt of 1857, because he made Pandey aware that their religious sentiments were not respected by the British.

Dalits have an emotional link with the 1857 War of Independence for they believe that it was initiated by them. They claim that the Soldier Revolt by the mostly Dalit Indian soldiers in the British Army that took place in many places especially Jhansi in 1857, snowballed into the War of Independence. It was a War of Independence since the Dalits were fighting for their motherland rather than to gain power. In most of the urban and rural areas Dalits fought shoulder to shoulder with other caste peasantry and elites. The Dalit men were followed by their women in these fighting against the British power and in many places these women were in the leading role in the revolt of 1857. Thewomen like Jhalkari Bai of the kori caste, Uda Devi, a pasi, Avanti Bai, a lodhi, Mahabiri Devi, a bhangi and Asha Devi, a gurjari, all stated to be involved in the 1857 revolt, have become the symbols of bravery of particular Dalit castes and ultimately of all Dalits.

Reading the histories of Dalit women's role in 1857 through the lens of representation adds important dimensions to our understandings of it, while also revealing tensions between the pedagogical and the performative, the rhetoric and the reality. Dalit literature on 1857 provides us a significant moment to examine alternative representations of Dalit women, totally separate from the women as a whole. Dalit

women emerge here as not only visible, but as conspicuous and central characters, and objects of attention and adulation.

Jhalkari Bai

One of the most prominent 1857 Dalit revolutionary from Jhansi was Jhalkari Bai who fought bravely against the British along with her husband Puran Koriunder the leadership of Rani Lakshmi Bai. In the testimony we can see a vast number of popular Hindi tracts, written by various authors, and cultural invocations on her, including comics, poems, plays, novels, biographies, 'nautankis', and even magazines and organizations in her name. To name just a few, there is the comic *Jhalkari Bai*; poems variously titled *Virangana Jhalkari Bai Kavya*, *Jhansi ki Sherni: Virangana Jhalkari Bai ka Jeevan Charitra*, and *Virangana Jhalkari Bai Mahakavva*; plays and nautankis called *Virangana Jhalkari Bai* and *Achhut Virangana* Nautanki, novels and biographies like *Virangana Jhalkari Bai* and *Achhut Virangana*; and a magazine called *Jhalkari Sandesh*, published from Agra. Various Dalit magazines have published articles on her.[7]

Jhalkari Bai hailed from Jhansi,is verily depicted as an immortal martyr (Amar Shaheed) of 1857, belonging to the kori caste. Her husband Puran Kori was an ordinary soldier in the kingdom of raja Gangadhar Rao. Jhalkari Bai is depicted as an ideal woman, occasionally helping her husband in his traditional occupation of cloth weaving, and also sometimes accompanying him to the royal palace. She is stated to be brave since her childhood and further got training from her husband in archery, wrestling, horse-riding and shooting. Her face and body structure is said to resemble Lakshmi Bai exactly. Slowly Jhalkari Bai and Lakshmi Bai become friends. Jhalkari was entrusted with the charge of leading the women's wing of the army, known as the "*Durga Dal*". When the 1857 revolt began, the rulers were mostly interested in just saving their thrones and it was not a freedom struggle for them. It was Dalits who made it a freedom struggle.[8]

When the British besieged the fort of Jhansi, Jhalkari Bai fought fiercely. She urged Rani Lakshmi Bai to escape from the palace and instead she herself took on the guise of the Rani and led the movement from Dantiya gate and Bhandari gate to Unnao gate. Her husband died while fighting with the British and when Jhalkari Bai heard this, she became a "wounded tigress". She killed many British, and managed to hoodwink them for a long time, before they discovered her true identity. According to some versions, suddenly many bullets hit her, and she died. Some state that she was set free, lived till 1890 and became a legend of her time. Jhalkari Bai has been appropriated, eulogized and celebrated by all Dalit groups, irrespective of divisions between them, and has become a symbol of unity of all dalits.[9]

It is interesting that many of these narrative poems (*Khand Kavyas*) have cleverly appropriated the famous poem written by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan on *Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai*. Not only are the lines and the words given new meanings and completely reinterpreted, they are also easy to remember. Thus goes one on Jhalkari Bai:[10]

"*Khub Lari Jhalkari Tu Tau, Teri Ek Jawani Thi,*
Dur Firangi Ko Karne Mein, Veeron Mein Mardani Thi,
Har Bolon Ke Much Se Sun Hum Teri Yeh Kahani Thi,
Rani Ki Tu Saathin Banker, Jhansi Fatah Karani Thi....
Datiya Fatak Raund Firangi, Agge Barh Jhalkari Thi,
Kali Roop Bhayankar Garjan, Mano Karak Damini Thi,
Kou Firangi Aankh Uthain, Dhar Se Shish Uteri Thi,
Har Bolon Ke Much Se Sun Ham, Roop Chandika Pani Thi"

(Jhalkari you really fought, your youthfulness was unique. You were a man among the brave in ousting the British. We heard your story from the mouth of warriors. You pledged for Jhansi to be victorious by being a friend of the queen. Jhalkari, you rode from the Datiya gate, trampling the British. You were like the Kali, and your strike was like lightning. As soon as a British raised his head, you struck immediately. We heard your deeds from the warriors, reciting tales of your bravery.)

Jhalkari Bai claim her to be an accomplice of Lakshmi Bai and bore a striking resemblance to the Rani, who took on her garb to save the rani's life. It is stated that Jhalkari Bai was even worried that Lakshmi Bai might surrender herself to the British as she was very scared of war. Challenging myths and histories surrounding Lakshmi Bai, it is argued that in reality Lakshmi Bai not only managed to escape to the forests of Nepal with the help of the ruler of Pratapgarh, she died only in 1915 at the age of 80. It is Jhalkari Bai who is the real martyr. She was a Dalit woman, with no kingdom, no palace, no expensive jewelry, and no silken clothes. She was neither a queen nor the daughter of a feudal lord, nor the wife of a 'jagirdar'. She fought selflessly, only for the love of her country, and thus her sacrifice far surpasses anyone else's.[11]

Uda Devi

Uda Devi is said to have been born in the village Ujirao of Lucknow. She was also known as Jagrani and was married to a soldier Makka Pasi. Uda Devi is remembered not only for her stories of valour but also for her skill as a leader who managed to mobilize people, especially Dalit women, to take up arms against the British. She was part of the royal guard of Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh. Her husband, Makka Pasi, worked as a foot soldier in the army of Awadh's Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah.Hazrat Mahal's palace had several women belonging to marginalized communities, and their occupation was mostly to take care of the needs of the royalty. Some of them, who showed promise, were also trained as warriors. Uda Devi was one of them.[12]

Uda formed a women's army, with herself as the commander. Amid the revolt of 1857, on June 10, at Chinhat near Ismailganj, a battle was fought between the army of Lucknow and the British troops led by Henry Lawrence, in which Makka Pasi lost his life. The death of her husband spurred Uda Devi on to take up a more active role in the mutiny.On November 16, 1857, when the British attacked Sikandar Bagh in Lucknow under Campbell Uda Devi was among the soldiers who clashed with the British regiment. Although not much of the fight has been documented in history, it is said that Uda Devi was one of them, who is said to have climbed over a 'Peepal' tree and shot dead, according to some accounts 32 and some 36, British soldiers.[13]

British commander Campbell and W. Gordon-Alexander were left in surprise when their soldiers were picked off one by one but no shooter could be located. After a while, the British army realized that the bullets were coming from a big Peepal tree, which was a spot for relaxation and shelter for the British troops.A battalion shot this mysterious killer down and she landed on the ground, covered in blood. It was only when her helmet was removed that people realized that a woman named Uda Devi was responsible for the killings.Realizing her brave feat, even British officers like Campbell bowed their heads over her dead body in respect.[14]

In the account it is written that she was armed with a pair of heavy old-pattern cavalry pistols, one of which was in her belt still loaded, and her pouch was still about half full of ammunition, while from her perch in the tree, which had been carefully prepared before the attack, she had killed more than half-a-dozen men.[15]

It is significant here that even W. Gordon-Alexander's account of the storming of Sikandar Bagh by British troops states:[16]

"In addition...there were...even a few amazon negresses, amongst the slain. These amazons having no religious prejudices againstthe use of greased cartridges, whether of pigs' or other animal fat, although doubtless professed Muhammadans, were armed with rifles. While the Hindu and Muhammadan East Indian rebels were all armed with musket; they fought like wild cats, and it was not till after they were killed that their sex was even suspected."

Thus, Uda Devi is revered by the Pasis particularly, and has emerged as a symbol of Pasi honour, dignity, pride, mobilization and rights. Even today a huge public rally and a mela is organized in Lucknow every year near the statue of Uda Devi at Sikandar Bagh on November 16, the stated day of her martyrdom. Dalit men and women from UP as well as Madhya Pradesh, Bengal, and Bihar gather to pay homage to Uda Devi:[17]

"*Koi Unko Habsin Kehta, Koi Kehta Neech Achchut'*
Abla Kot Unhein Batlave, Koi Kahe Unhe Majboot"

(Some called them black African women, some untouchable. Some called them weak, others strong.)

Asha Devi Gurjari

Asha Devi Gurjari was a courageous freedom fighter who played a significant role during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Born in 1829 in a village in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, she is celebrated as a heroic woman for her leadership and sacrifice against British colonial rule. She successfully organized women from the Kalshyan Khap (predominantly Gurjar villages in Shamli and Kairana) to resist British forces.

She is portrayed as a leader to a large number of young girls and women and it is stated that on May 8, 1857, she along with a large number of other women like Valmiki Mahaviri Devi, Rahimi Gurjari, Bhagwani Devi, Bhagwati Devi, Habiba Gurjari, Indrakaur, Kushal Devi, Naamkaur, Raajkaur, Ranviri Valmiki, Seheja Valmiki and Shobha Devi attacked the British army. Her group engaged in fierce combat for two days and nights. It is said that she died while fighting the British.[18]

According to many other accounts, it was only after 250 of her female soldiers were killed that the British were able to capture her alive on the battlefield. She was subsequently executed by hanging by the British authorities, along with 11 other female soldiers. Asha Devi is often highlighted in subaltern and Dalit narratives of the 1857 revolt. These histories aim to bring to light the contributions of "backward caste" heroes whose stories were frequently omitted from mainstream colonial or high-caste historical records. Today, she remains a powerful symbol of political self-respect and bravery for the Bahujan community.

Avanti Bai

Rani Avanti Bai Lodhi (16 August 1831-20 March 1858) was the queen of Ramgarh (in present-day Dindori, Malda district, Madhya Pradesh) and a prominent leader in the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Often compared to Rani Lakshmi Bai for her valour, she is celebrated as one of the few Indian rulers who successfully defeated British forces in a direct battle during the uprising. Narratives on Avanti Bai claim to combine history and literature.

When her husband, King Vikramaditya Singh, was declared "insane" and the British attempted to seize Ramgarh under the Doctrine of Lapse, Avanti Bai refused to yield. She expelled British-appointed

administrators and took over the state's governance herself. She raised and personally led an army of approximately 4,000 soldiers, composed of local farmers and tribal warriors. In November 1857, she led her troops to a stunning victory against British forces led by Deputy Commissioner Waddington near Mandla, forcing them to retreat. After the British returned with reinforced troops and artillery, she was forced to retreat to the forests of Devharigarh, where she continued to harass British camps using guerrilla tactics. On 20 March 1858, cornered by British forces and facing certain capture, Rani Avanti Bai chose to follow the example of Rani Durgavati. She sacrificed her own life by piercing herself with her sword rather than surrendering to the enemy.[19]

Mahabiri Devi

Mahabiri Deviwas a fearless Dalit freedom fighter from the Valmiki (Bhangi) community who led a heroic resistance against the British during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. She was born in Mundbhar village in the Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. Though she was uneducated, she was very intelligent and opposed exploitation of any kind from an early age. She was born for the poor and fought for them. Slowly her fame spread. Even before the rebellion, Mahabiri Devi was a social reformer. She founded a women's organization to raise awareness against the practice of manual scavenging (referred to as '*Grihnit Karya*' or dirty work), encouraging women and children to live with self-respect.[20]

During the uprising of 1857, she mobilized a group of 22 local women from her village. These were common women with no formal military training who decided to take up arms to protect their community from British oppression. On 8 May 1857, after British forces killed local farmers who refused to pay taxes, Mahabiri Devi and her group launched a daring attack on British soldiers. Despite being outnumbered and outgunned, they fought using primitive weapons like swords, spears, knives, and sticks. Historical accounts state they managed to kill several British soldiers before being overwhelmed. Mahabiri Devi and all 22 women in her group were eventually captured and killed by the British, making the supreme sacrifice for the country.[21]

Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, Mahabiri Devi, and along with them many other Dalit women, emerge as physically commanding and armed, infused with power, strength, bravery, activism and sacrifice, locked in violent conflict with the British during the rebellion of 1857. These are not just stories of brave Dalit women but of all Dalits, of their legacy, of their bravery, of their pride, of their sacrifice in service of the nation.

Conclusion: These narratives, preserved through oral traditions and folk culture, serve as a "history from below" that subverts conventional, elite-centric records which often ignored non-royal participants. Figures like Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, and Mahabiri Devi have become Dalit heroic women, serving as potent symbols of pride and self-respect for marginalized communities today. Their struggle represents a unique intersection of caste, gender, and resistance, showing that Dalit women were active agents who fought for the nation's freedom while simultaneously resisting the social oppression they faced within India. Their legacy continues to inspire modern social justice movements, proving that gender and caste were never barriers to extraordinary bravery and leadership.

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5. Ram Dayal Verma, "*San 1857 ki Amar Shaheed Virangana Uda Devi*" Hardoi, 2nd Edition, 2004, p. 13.
6. There was a factory in Barrackpore where cartridges were manufactured. Many of the workers of this factory belonged to the untouchable communities. Matadin Bhangi was a employed as a sweeper (Mehatar) at the Barrackpore Cartridge Factory. Due to his close contact with the British army, he was aware of all the activities there. It was January 22, 1857, when Matadin Bhangi felt thirsty and asked a soldier Mangal Panday for a mug of water. Mangal Pandey, a Brahmin, refused him water because the worker was an untouchable. This was very humiliating for Matadin. Matadin Bhangi retaliated to the Brahmin soldier Mangal Panday saying, "*Bara awa hai Brahman ka beta. Jin kartuson ka tum upyog karat ho, unpar gaaye aur suar ki charbi lagawal jaat hai, jinhe tun apan daatun se torkar banduk men bharat ho. O samay tomhar jati aur dharam kahan jawat. Dhikkar tumhare is brahmanatwa ka.*" (You claim to be a highly respectable Brahmin, but the cartridges which you bite with your teeth and insert in your guns, are all rubbed with the fat of cows and pigs. What happens to your caste and religion then? Curse on your Brahminism.) This propelled both Hindu and Muslim soldiers of the company to raise the banner of revolt. In the charge-sheet that was made, the first name was that of Matadin Bhangi, who was later arrested. All the arrested revolutionaries were court-martialed. Matadin was charged for treason against the British. (*https://www.ambedkaritetoday.com/2019/11/matadin-father-of-first-war-of-indian-rebellion.html*)
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